DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 662 SO 030 645

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TITLE Art and the Western Experience: A Source of Information for American History Classes.
PUB DATE 1996-00-00
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Education; *Art History; Artists; Elementary Secondary Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS *United States (West); Westward Movement (United States)

ABSTRACT

Early European and Euro-American artists documented the land, people, flora, and fauna of western North America. These artists gave Europeans and eastern Americans their first glimpse of the west. Because artists were important to the early explorers and topographers of the west, this document advocates study of western art and artists as an integrated part of studying the history of the North American west. The document presents a brief survey of important western artists from 1778 to 1975. Information is given regarding World Wide Web sites that allow visual access to western art collections. Contains a 44-item reading list. (MM)

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ART AND THE WESTERN EXPERIENCE:

A SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR AMERICAN HISTORY CLASSES

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American western art deals with the western experience and dates from about the early 1800s. It covers an area of the country from the Mississippi River to the west coast of the United States. According to Don Cusic (1994, 10), an author of many articles on the Old West, the most popular picture themes involve Indians, cowboys, the frontier experience, mountain men, pioneer life, and landscapes of the West. Cusic states that the Lewis and Clark Expedition so enthralled Americans that pictures of Indians and Indian life came to dominate western art during the first half of the 1800s. These pictures documented a culture soon to disappear. Indian life, the West, cowboys, pioneers, and the frontier gave us an art distinctively American.

Cusic maintains that the appeal in western art is that it captures the western experience. This experience includes spectacular scenery, the heyday of the cowboy, the vanishing of a people, culture, and way of life, and a time when the frontier meant an excursion into the unknown. Western art is active art; it transports the viewer to an untamed past. It deals with the conflict of people and nature and with the clashing of the white and Native American cultures. For these reasons and for reasons of personal interest, students in American history classes might want to make a more direct study of the art and artists of the western experience.

STUDYING THE WESTERN EXPERIENCE THROUGH WESTERN ART

Cusic suggests that the study of the western experience begin with the first "western" artists, those individuals who accompanied early explorers on ships off the west coast. John Webber illustrated Captain Cook's 1778 voyage, and John Sykes did the same for Captain George Vancouver's Pacific expedition between 1790 and 1795. Artists were important to the explorers and topographers of the West. They served the purpose later served by photographers. They documented visually the land, people, flora, and fauna, and they gave Americans their first glimpse of the frontier.

The first real examples of American western art came in the early 1800s when French nobleman Charles B. J. F. de Saint-Memin (1770-1852) painted the earliest known Indian portraits, those of the Osage Indian chiefs of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory. Thomas Jefferson had invited the chiefs to Washington in an attempt to establish diplomatic relations with the natives of the region.

Philadelphians Titian Ramsay Peale (1799-1885) and Samuel Seymour (1796-1823) were the first American artists to go west on an expedition. In 1820, nineteen-year-old Peale sketched geological formations and other natural wonders. He made the first sketches of a Plains Indian hunt and tipis. Seymour painted Indians in ceremonial activities. He was also the first to paint the Rocky Mountains.

Though not an artist, Thomas L. McKenney was instrumental in the development of western art. After having served as the head of the Office of Indian Affairs in Washington,

McKenney established the first museum of Indian people and Indian life. In 1822, McKenney began commissioning portraits of Indian chiefs. McKenney also sent Otto Lewis (1799-1858) to do watercolors of treaty conferences on the frontier. In 1835, Lewis published The Aboriginal Portfolio. Between 1836 and 1844, McKenney published the History of the Indian Tribes of the United States with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs. The three-volume set featured the Indian portraits and art work of Charles Bird King (1785-1862).

George Catlin (1796-1872) was the first American artist to go west on his own. By 1836, he had visited more than fifty different Indian tribes. By the time of his death, he had completed more than six hundred different Indian paintings. Many of these paintings appear in his Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians. In the East, Catlin painted the Delaware, Shawnee, and Iroquois. In his first trip up the Missouri River, he painted the Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Crow. He arrived in the Mandan villages to paint individuals and ceremonial life just as the smallpox epidemic of 1837 was sweeping through the area. Only 150 of the tribe survived out of a population of over twelve thousand. Among Plains Indians, Catlin painted the Osage, Kiowa, Comanche, and Wichita. Ethnologists and anthropologists have long praised Catlin's work for the ethnographic detail of his subject's dress and culture. Ever the preeminent artist and historian of Indians and the first to document the diversity of the native cultures, Catlin, nevertheless, had trouble selling his work, losing, at one point, many of his paintings to bankruptcy. In 1879, seven years after his death, the Smithsonian purchased his Indian gallery.

Swiss artist Karl Bodmer (1809-1893) and Austrian prince Maximilian Wied traveled to the United States in 1832 for a trip by steamboat up the Missouri River. At Fort McKenzie,

Bodmer observed and sketched a battle between the Blackfeet and the combined Cree and Assiniboine tribes. Returning downstream, the two visited the Mandan and Hidatsa villages. Bodmer's watercolors and Maximilian's text were published in German, French, and English as Travels in the Interior of North America. Because prints were expensive to reproduce in book form at the time, this edition enjoyed a rather narrow circulation. Nevertheless, Bodmer gained great fame as an artist of Indian life; his paintings had a technical superiority not found in Catlin's work.

In 1834, Scottish sportsman Sir William Stewart traveled the Rocky Mountains with famed mountain man Jim Bridger as his guide. In 1837, Stewart invited painter Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874) to join him on another expedition. During this trip, Miller observed, sketched, and later painted a trappers' rendezvous on the Green River. With these sketches, Miller did for trappers what Catlin had done for Indians. He had recorded a significant, albeit vanishing, way of life. Miller's one trip to the West provided him with an entire career of western paintings. Though he was never a great influence on the painters of his own time, the ethereal overtones of his work would later dominate western landscape painting. It is interesting that many of Miller's paintings were not "discovered" until a century after his death.

George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and Alfred Jacob Miller were the premier painters of the first half of the 1800s. In addition to these artists, several other painters also had a significant impact on western art. Swiss born Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834) documented a Sissetoon Sioux uprising near Grand Forks, Minnesota, in The Murder of David Tully and Family. Congress commissioned Seth Eastman (1808-1875), a graduate of West Point, to illustrate Indian Tribes of the United States by Henry Schoolcraft. Thomas Mickell Burnham (1818-1866) painted a

rendition of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. William Jacob Hays (1830-1875) specialized in western wildlife, especially the buffalo, and Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910) did paintings of the plains.

George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879) was the first major artist to actually grow up in the West. Born in Virginia, Bingham and his family moved to Missouri when Bingham was still just a boy. Bingham studied the ministry and law, and then art. Having spent several years in Washington as a portrait painter, Bingham returned to Missouri and painted his well-known Fur Traders Descending the Missouri. He is best known for his scenes of the everyday life of the people of the West. Bingham was one of the most popular artists of his time, though he was never very effective in his depictions of Indians.

Artist-ornithologist John James Audubon (1785-1851) studied in France before returning to America in 1803. Having failed in business and after a short stint as a taxidermist, Audubon traveled the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and Great Lakes areas studying and painting birds. He was unable to find an American publisher for his manuscript of a thousand birds, so he moved to England where he eventually found a publisher for his book. Returning to America in 1831, Audubon explored the Texas coast and the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, painting birds, deer, badgers, and foxes, and collecting Indian artifacts.

William T. Ranney (1813-1857) painted portraits and western themes. Prairie Burial pictured a pioneer family burying their child. Swiss born Rudolph Kurz (1818-1871) moved to St. Joseph, Missouri, sometime around 1846. He sketched the Iowa, Oto, Pawnee, and Osage tribes. In 1851, he sketched the Hidatsa and Mandan Indians until cholera broke out. He left when the Indians began to believe that his drawings were the cause of their suffering. English born James

Walker (1818-1889) sketched battle scenes in the Mexican War and Civil War. Later he went to California to paint the Mexican cowboys or vaqueros.

German born Charles Nahl (1819-1878) joined the California gold rush in 1850 as a miner, but wound up spending more of his time as an artist. He sketched the activities of the miners, exchanging his drawings for gold, and selling his pictures to newspapers and magazines. Sunday Morning in the Mines is Nahl's most popular work. He stands out as being one of the few artists to depict mining life in the West. Arthur F. Tait (1819-1905) never went to the West, but his western paintings were popular enough to be published by Currier and Ives. Newbold H. Trotter (1827-1898) painted animals, especially the buffalo, and German born Charles Wimar (1828-1862) produced paintings of landscapes and pioneer life. His best known work is The Attack on an Emigrant Train.

Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) was the American West's premier landscape artist of the 1800s. The people and animals in his murals were dwarfed by the grandeur and awesomeness of the mountains, canyons, and other natural wonders featured in his paintings. At the age of twenty-nine, Bierstadt joined an expedition to survey the Oregon Trail. Several other trips west followed. Popular in America and Europe, the European trained artist received the unheard of sum for the time of twenty-five thousand dollars for his six feet by ten feet mural, The Rocky Mountains. His Yellowstone paintings were also spectacular, and at the request of President Arthur, several of them hung in the White House.

Thomas Moran (1837-1926) was even better known than Bierstadt for his Yellowstone paintings. In 1871, Moran joined the first major expedition to Yellowstone. The geological survey team was government sponsored and headed by Dr. F. V. Hayden. Slight in build, Moran had his

difficulties on the trip. He especially disliked eating wild meat, and so spent many hours fishing for his meals. On July 20, 1871, the team reached the Mammoth Hot Springs, and in so doing, they became the first whites to see the spectacle. Moran's paintings and William Henry Jackson's photographs were submitted to Congress, and in 1872, Yellowstone became America's first national park. The government also purchased several of Moran's paintings, including his Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. In 1873, Moran joined Major John Wesley Powell for another expedition through Utah and Arizona on the Colorado River. In 1892, Moran returned to Yellowstone and painted the Golden Gate Canyon. Like Bierstadt, Moran painted the grandeur of the land.

Thomas Hill (1829-1913) was another painter of grandiose landscapes. In 1862, he moved to California to paint the Yosemite Valley. Hill painted large scenes on large canvases. His best known works include Grand Canyon of the Sierras and The Driving of the Last Spike.

Frederic Remington (1861-1909) and Charles Russell (1864-1926) dominated western art during the second half of the 1800s. Remington grew up in upstate New York, and though he continued to maintain a studio in the East, he made annual trips to the West. Remington began his career as a magazine illustrator. His popularity earned him the money to travel. His cowboy, cavalry, and Indian pictures created dramatic images of life in the West. He eventually painted in oil to produce works of art, and in 1895, he turned to sculpture. Charles Russell grew up in St. Louis, but soon moved to the West, where he worked as a cowboy and artist. His artistic talents were all innate and self-taught. Before his marriage, he dabbled in art, trading his sketches for drinks or a few dollars. In 1896, his new wife decided to market his paintings in the East. Before long, his works were selling widely. Russell was best when he drew the working cowboy. He also

produced many fine pieces of sculpture.

Charles Schreyvogel (1801-1912) painted army scenes. His interest in the cavalry resulted in My Bunkie, a western painting showing a cavalryman rescuing his officer. J. Edward Borein (1872-1954) was called the cowpuncher artist. The great N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945) illustrated the life of a cowboy in A Day at the Round-up. He also illustrated many of the works of James Fenimore Cooper. Frank Tenney Johnson (1874-1939) specialized in nocturnal scenes and scenes of Yellowstone Park. Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) met Buffalo Bill Cody in Paris in 1889. She did the famous painting of Buffalo Bill on top of a white horse. Irving R. Bacon (1875-1962) painted The Conquest of the Prairie. Indians watch as a glorified Buffalo Bill heads up a wagon train about to cross the plains. Carl Rungius (1869-1959) painted western wildlife, and Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919) painted landscapes. Elbridge Ayer Burbank (1858-1949) and Winold Reiss (1886-1953) painted Indians.

Artists have done more than eight hundred paintings of Custer's fight at the Little Bighorn in 1876. Remington and Russell painted their versions of the event, but the most famous painting, Custer's Last Fight, measuring twelve by thirty-two feet, was done by Cassily Adams (1843-1921). Anheuser-Busch acquired the painting in 1890 when it took over the assets of a bankrupt saloon. Busch then hired Otto Becker (1854-1945) to paint a smaller version of the picture. Busch sent more than 150,000 copies of the Becker version to saloons everywhere, making the picture one of the country's most recognized paintings.

Many artists have created sculptures. Sculptors of note include Sally James Farnham (1876-1943), a friend of Remington's; Alexander Phimister Proctor (1862-1950) and Henry Merwin Shrady (1871-1922), sculptors of buffalo and other animals and figures; and James Earl

Fraser, famous for creating the End of the Trail sculpture in 1898.

Toward the end of the 1800s, an artists colony developed around Taos, New Mexico, the Taos Society of Artists. The original members of the Society, Joseph Sharp (1859-1953), Ernest Blumenschein (1874-1960), Oscar Berninghaus (1874-1952), Walter Ufer (1876-1937), W. Herbert Dunton (1878-1936), Ernest Martin Hennings (1886-1956), and E. Irving Couse (1866-1936), made significant contributions to western art. Their subjects include Indians, landscapes, and cowboys.

Other artists associated with the Southwest are Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) and his Medicine Robe and William R. Leigh (1866-1955) and his paintings of the Pueblo Indians. Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is best known for her paintings of huge flowers and white animal skulls, and Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) for his portrayals of rural America, small towns, and folksy subjects, all of which were part of the West.

WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

Students can view many of the works of the artists of the western experience through the World Wide Web. Sites will change what they have to offer from time to time. The National Museum of American Art (http://www.nmaa.si.edu/) has Bierstadt's Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Dunton's The Enemies' Horses, Proctor's Pursued, Blakelock's At Nature's Mirror, and O'Keeffe's Yellow Calla. Click on "search site" and go to "works of art." O'Keeffe's Red Canna is at the University of Arizona Museum of Art (http://www.arizona.edu/services/museums/art.html). The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, (http://www.butlerart.com/

per___col.htm) has Bingham's The Jolly Flat Boat Men; Bierstadt's Oregon Trail; Benton's The Chilmark; Berninghaus' Braves of the Taos Mountains; Couse's A Vision of the Past; Burbank's Chief Joseph (Nez Perce), Chief Geronimo (Apache), Standing Bull (Southern Cheyenne), Chief Spotted Elk (Ogalalla Sioux), and other Indian portraits; Sharp's Chief Two Leggins (Crow) and Tailfeathers (Blackfoot) among other paintings; and Catlin's Buffalo Hunt Chase, Wild Horse at Play, Antelope Shooting, and other selections. Sharp's Indian Brave is at the Hirsch Fine Art Gallery (http://www.wingspread.com/ts/g240.html). Catlin's North American Indians is at the Historic Prints and Drawings page (http://www.wingspread.com/30k/k29.html).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (http://www.metmuseum.org/htmlfile/gallery/first/amer1.html) has Bingham's Fur Traders Descending the Missouri. The Dallas Museum of Art (http://www.unt.edu/dfw/dma/www/america/postlist.htm) has Benton's The Prodigal Son. The Frederic Remington Art Museum in Ogdensburg, New York, (http://www.northnet.org/broncho/) plans to show exhibits soon. The Gilcrease Institute in Oklahoma (http://tulsaweb.com/gilcrease.htm) has many western paintings and pieces of sculpture. Some of these may be for display on the Web in the future. Students can get information on the Taos Society of Artists (http://laplaza.taos.nm.us/a___l/) at their address.

The Owings-Dewey Fine Art Gallery (http://www.wingspread.com/sf/g160.html) has Sharp's Snow Storm Over Twinings and Berninghaus' December Evening. E. Irving Couse's Smoke Purification is at the Nedra Matteucci's Fenn Gallery (http://www.wingspread.com/sf/g060.html). The Zaplin-Lampert Gallery (http://www.wingspread.com/sf/g238.html) has Bodmer's Mandan Chief and Bierstadt's The Artist Painting in Wind River. Ellen's Place (http://www.ionet.net/~jellenc/moran.html) has Moran's Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, The

Chasm of the Colorado, The Grand Canyon, The Mountain of the Holy Cross, Summit of the Sierras, and Shoshone Falls of Snake River, Idaho. Dixon's Greaswood Flat, The Navajo, and Lonesome Road are at the Mitchell-Brown Fine Art Gallery (http://www.wingspread.com/sf/g134.html). His Skies of New Mexico, Spanish Cowboy, and Morning in the Inyo Range are at the Bingham Gallery (http://bingham.netgate.net/dixon.html). The Meadowlark Gallery (http://www.wtp.net/%7Emeadow/) plans to show the paintings of J. Edward Borein soon. Lastly, students can view the Frank Tenney Johnson (http://www.lainet.com/%7Ecdbanzai/absolute/) exhibit of paintings of cowboys and frontier life at its Web address.

American western art deals with themes of the western experience: the grandeur of the land, the hegemony of the cowboy, the vanishing of the Indians and buffalo, the frontier experience, mountain men, and pioneer life. It shows the conflict of people and nature and the displacement of Native Americans by white settlers. Cusic helps the reader to identify some of the more prominent artists of the western experience. Students interested in the West will also find an interest in the art of the West.

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